

## MANAGEMENT BASICS: CREATING HEALTHY WORK ENVIRONMENTS

*by Herbert W. Snyder*



**R**epetitive motion injuries, poor ergonomics, sick building syndrome and workplace violence are among the seemingly unlimited range of workplace maladies that reduce worker productivity and create headaches for library directors. Given the demands placed on library managers to provide services, it's easy for workplace health and safety to take a backseat to more immediate concerns such as staffing the circulation desk or cutting an additional 5% from the budget. As with many aspects of library control, however, even a small investment into health and safety can yield significant savings to the library in terms of reduced absenteeism, higher productivity and lowered worker's compensation premiums. Moreover, despite the seemingly technical nature of occupational health and safety, it should be an integral part of basic library management.

It's important to remember that your employees spend a significant portion of their days in a physical environment that's under your control. Employees can become sick or injured on the job as a result of this environment. Too often, however, managers imagine that since they have no expertise as electricians, law enforcement officers, or industrial hygienists, workplace health and safety isn't their concern. This may be true to the extent that no one expects a librarian to rewire a breaker box, subdue a violent patron, or monitor the water quality in the drinking fountains. More generally, creating a safe and healthy workplace begins when someone in the organization decides that it's a matter that's worth taking seriously – a basic management function.

### IT BEGINS WITH MANAGEMENT COMMITMENT

I suspect that no one would say that he or she is against having a safe and healthy workplace. But what are you really doing to make your library a better physical environment for work? Like any other aspect of an organization, the success of workplace health initiatives begins with the involvement of top management. Saying you're in favor of workplace health means little without taking action to implement your commit-

ment. The most basic and cost-effective steps that libraries can take to improve their occupational health and safety include:

Accountability for health and safety matters in the library. Too often good ideas are never implemented or fade away because it's no one's responsibility to make sure they get done. The most common method to begin ensuring that health and safety are dealt with in the library is to appoint someone as safety officer; that is, an employee whose job it is to keep records of injuries, investigate complaints and generally inspect the workplace to make improvements. Accountability, however, should not rest solely in the hands of a single employee. In order for health and safety to improve, it needs to become part of employees', particularly managers', jobs. One way in which this can be done is to incorporate it into job performance evaluations.

Allocating resources to make the program successful. It isn't enough to say you're concerned about workplace health if you don't allocate any resources to improve it. This begins by giving your safety officer the time to deal with safety matters. Simply adding a title to an employee who already has a full-time set of job duties will almost certainly guarantee that the new duties will be ignored. The time need not be a significant amount. Even a few hours each month off the circulation desk to deal with workplace safety can yield significant results and provide concrete evidence that you take the matter seriously.

Including your employees. Even though workplace health and safety directly affects the quality of work-life for employees, it isn't unusual for them to be resistant. Any organizational change can be viewed with suspicion, particularly if it appears to require additional work or scrutiny by management. Including employees in safety programs helps ease resistance to change. An easy method of including employees is to constitute a health and safety committee that makes recommendations for training, workplace improvements and makes regular safety inspections of the workplace.

Being proactive about health and safety. Don't wait for injuries or complaints before you make change in

the workplace. By the time someone is injured or complains, productivity has already been affected and worse, you may actually have lost the services of an employee. As with most problems in the workplace, prevention and early intervention is cheaper than repairs and reconstruction after the fact.

## **GETTING HELP IMPROVING HEALTH AND SAFETY IN YOUR LIBRARY**

You may be thinking that it's all well and good to want to make the library a safer and healthier place but lack a sense of how to start given your limited resources. The good news is that not only are there plenty of resources available to help you, many of them are free. Two government resources of value in this regard are the Indiana Bureau of Safety Education and Training and the federal Occupational Safety and Health Administration.

The best place for Indiana libraries to begin is with the Bureau of Safety Education and Training (BuSET). This is a division of the Indiana Department of Labor (<http://www.state.in.us/labor/buset/index.html>) that works with employers to improve health and safety in the workplace. Among the services that employers can receive from BuSET are:

**Consultation.** BuSet will visit your workplace, evaluate hazards and provide guidance for how to correct them. Although the visit is confidential and will not trigger a state or federal inspection, you will be required to correct any hazards that are uncovered.

**Educational materials.** BuSET provides a number of free publications dealing with workplace safety including: Emergency Action Plans and guidelines for preventing workplace violence.

**Seminars and training.** BuSET offers a number of seminars throughout the year on topics that range from accident investigation to workplace-violence to Internet safety.

In addition to the state BuSet resources, the federal government offers a variety of resources and training through the Occupational Health and Safety Administration (OSHA). Many of these are available locally and free of charge. For a schedule of times and places for OSHA training or a list of their publications, consult their web site (<http://www.osha.gov/index.html>).

These and other resources can aid library managers and their staffs in dealing with work-place health and safety issues in a way that makes the best use of limited time and resources. A healthy and safe work environment can increase productivity, decrease staff downtime, and overall, create a better library. Managers who hold safety and health in high priority may soon see

both their employees and the library itself reaping the benefits.

## **ABOUT THE AUTHOR**

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